DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 337 UD 035 831

AUTHOR	Mehra, Beloo
TITLE	Recognizing, Respecting, and Representing: Three R's of Asian Indian Cultural Identity in American Schools.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	33p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Asian American Students; *Cultural Differences; *Educational Experience; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; *Personal Narratives
IDENTIFIERS	Identity (Psychological); *Identity Formation; *Indian Americans

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a collection of narratives of ways in which cultural identities of Asian American parents and children interact with their experiences in U.S. schools. This qualitative study was designed to understand the complexities of the ways in which the unique cultural identities of Asian Indian children and their parents interact with school environments. Parents in four Indian American families in a Midwestern university town consented to participate, for a total of eight elementary school students. Semistructured and open-ended interviews were conducted with parents, children, and school personnel. The narrative approach allowed the emic voice of research participants to take center stage as the etic interpretation of the researcher is given. These first-person accounts show views of individual and collective identities in the public context of the school. Such accounts can be used in curriculum examination of race, ethnicity, and culture and can strengthen resistance against essentialist and reductionist portraits of ethnic groups. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 479 337

Recognizing, Respecting, and Representing: Three R's of Asian Indian Cultural Identity in American Schools

Beloo Mehra, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor of Education
Individualized Liberal and Professional Studies
Antioch University McGregor
Yellow Springs, OH 45387-1609
E-mail: bmehra@mcgregor.edu

Paper presented at AERA Annual Meeting, April 21-25, 2003

DRAFT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Mehra

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD 035 831

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

This paper presents a collection of narratives of ways in which cultural identities of Asian Indian parents and children interact and intersect with their experiences in American schools. In minority families with non-mainstream cultural and linguistic backgrounds, significant discontinuities exist between school and home cultures. With a rapidly increasing diverse population, public institutions including schools face a challenge with regard to recognizing, respecting, and representing the particular identities of culturally marginalized citizens of society. Such recognition of cultural particularity, extended to all individuals, is compatible with a form of universalism that counts the culture and cultural context valued by individuals as among their basic interests (Gutmann, 1994). This paper presents Asian Indian voices on how they see their cultural particularities being recognized or represented in the schools.

Theoretical and Educational Significance

Taylor (1994) argues that public institutions should not, or cannot refuse to respond to the demand for recognition by citizens. Such recognition assures the rights of individuals as human beings and acknowledges the particular needs of individuals as members of specific cultural groups. If individual identities are partly constituted by collective identities and collective dialogues about identity (Gutmann, 1994), it becomes important to study how individuals understand and narrate the ways in which their cultural identities (individual and collective) are being recognized (or not) in schools.

As Asian Indian immigrant parents make sense of a dialectic process of belonging and not belonging caused by displacement and migration, their children begin to write their unique cross-cultural narratives of somewhere-in-between when they reflect on their schooling experiences. These narratives of educational and affective experiences of social and cultural marginality offer alternative ways of seeing and thinking, thereby allowing educators and educational researchers to understand the experiences of students who move between cultures on a daily basis. This understanding will also help education community to challenge the prevailing Eurocentrism in American education system (a microcosm of American society) that assumes the "existence of irreducibly distinct cultural variants that shape the historical paths of different peoples" (Bromley, 2000).

Asian Indians are among the new immigrants who constantly move between the pressures to melt into prevailing ideological constructs of liberal capitalism, and active engagement in a

process of de-linking from dominant paradigms by refiguring questions of language, class, ethnicity and gender (Pandurang, 2001). As their children begin to interact with the mainstream culture in the context of their schooling experiences, the intergenerational and intercultural conflicts take center stage in their identity formation processes. Ethnographic and contextualized research with different immigrant groups that brings to light such intercultural or cross-cultural experiences of children as they go through their schooling years can help build a reliable database of knowledge that is not reductive or essentialist in nature.

This paper presents results from one such study that involved selected Asian Indian children at cultural crossroads from where they would choose a direction for their evolving and emerging individual and collective identities (which are also multiple and shifting in nature). These directions would be based on their personal experiences as children of Indian immigrants, and as children of their parents. But as unique as these children's paths would be, they would also leave behind some traces for others to follow as Asian Indian immigration continues to increase rapidly. The recent U.S. Census report reveals that the Asian Indian population nationwide grew by 105.9 percent, from 815,447 in 1990 to 1,678,765 in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The resulting influx of Asian Indian children in American schools necessitates research that documents the narratives of recognition of their individual and collective cultural identities in schools.

The Study

This qualitative study was designed to understand the complexity of the ways in which the unique cultural identities of Asian Indian children and their parents interacted with the school environments. Gaining access to parents, children, and school personnel, building rapport with research participants, and gaining their trust were critical to this study. Parents in four families provided me with verbal and written consent confirming their willingness to participate in this research. In order to understand the diversity and complexity that exists in a particular ethnic minority group, I selected families that varied on criteria such as children's ages, language spoken at home, working or at-home mother, and number of years in the U.S. All participants were given pseudonyms to assure anonymity. Only those details about the families that have a bearing on the study are included in this paper.

This study was conducted in a Midwestern university town. Almost all the parents participating in the study were highly educated and many worked in professional fields such as

academe, medicine and corporate sector. The eight children participating in the study attended five different schools in the town, though only four schools (three elementary, and one high school) agreed to participate in the study. I also interviewed selected teachers (who worked with these particular children) and other school personnel.

Multiple semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted with parents, children, and school personnel. Several of these interviews often took the form of focused conversations. Most of the interviews with children and parents were conducted at their homes. Some interviews were also conducted at my home and at the children's schools depending upon the convenience of these places for participants. Interviews with school personnel were conducted at schools - in classrooms, offices, and even teachers' lounges; in between classes, after school hours, and even during lunchtime. Two Asian Indian teachers, including one who also participated as a parent, were also interviewed. Observations in and around the schools and at selected school events, casual conversations with the research participants over telephone, in person, and at local community events provided additional data. The data was coded and compiled into relevant categories for organization and interpretation. Inductive and holistic data analysis was used to discover the key emerging issues to understand the intricate and multi-layered nature of participants' experiences. These interpretations were based on my understanding of the experiences of my research participants as described by them, and as seen through my eyes as an Asian Indian researcher.

The nature and methodology of the project demanded a narrative style of writing. The narrative approach allows the emic (insider) voice of research participants to take center stage as I interweave their voices represented by direct quotes, with my etic (outsider) interpretation of the issues emerging about the phenomena. The participants' views are largely grounded in their experiences and narratives, and my role as a researcher has been to provide an additional interpretive layer to those insider voices.

Background information about the families and children participating in this study is presented in the following tables. Except for one mother, all the parents in the study are first-generation immigrants from India. All the families have been living in the U.S. for at least more than 15 years, and are Hindu by religion.

Table 1: Families in the Study

Name	No. of years in the U.S.	Names and ages of children	Parents' region of emigration from India	Reason for migration	Languages spoken at home	Education level of parents	Occupation
Anand Family Reema (M) Vijay (F)	16 (M) 23 (F)	S- Rahul (14) D- Vrinda (11)	North-central (M & F)	Higher Educ. (F)	Hindi, English	M. S. (M)[c] Ph. D. (F)[d]	At-home (M) Professor (F)
Sharma Family Veena (M)	18 (M)	D- Shruti[a] (16)	North (M)	Marriage (M)	Hindi, Kashmiri, English	M. D. (M)[c,d]	Physician (M)
Roy Family Devika (M) Debraj (F)	16 (F)	D- Priyanka (8) D- Mallika (5)	South (M)[b] North-east (F)	Higher Educ. (F)	English	B. A. (M) [d] Ph. D. (F)[d]	High School Teacher (M) Corporate Executive (F)
Shah Family Neeta (M) Ravi (F)	16 (M) 26 (F)	D- Sangeeta (14) D- Sumita (10) D- Shreya (5)	West-central (M & F)	Higher Educ. (F)	Gujarati, English	B. S. (M)[d] Ph. D. (F)[d]	At-home (M) Professor (F)

Key : M : Mother F : Father D: Daughter S: Son

[a] An older son who graduated from the high school two years ago is not one of the research participants.
[b] The mother in this case was born and raised in the U.S., her parents had migrated from a southern state in India.
[c] Highest degree attained in India.
[d] Highest degree attained in U.S.

Table 2: Children in the Study

Name	Age	Grade	School	Observed in School	Kind of Classroom	Knowledge of parents' mother tongue
Rahul Anand	14	Eighth	*Middle*[e]	No	Regular	Can speak, read and write
Vrinda Anand	11	Fifth	Greensville	Yes	Regular	Can speak, read and write
Shruti Sharma	16	Eleventh	Lindbloom High	Yes	Gifted	Understands, can speak a little
Priyanka Roy	8	Second	Flower	Yes	Gifted	Knows only a few words
Mallika Roy	5	KG	*Elementary*[e]	No	Regular	Knows only a few words
Sangeeta Shah	14	Sub-freshman (combined 7th-8th grade)	Lindbloom High	Yes	Gifted	Understands a little, knows few words
Sumita Shah	10	Fourth	Williamsburg	Yes	Gifted	Understands a little, knows few words
Shreya Shah	5	KG	*Elementary*[e]	No	Regular	Knows only a few words

Findings

Several important themes emerged from the data; these were organized under two key headings. Specific examples in form of participants' quotes and vignettes from my observations are included as parts constituting the whole narrative of these themes. My researcher voice becomes more prominent in the last section of the paper where I analyze these narratives to offer some recommendations for schools.

Expressions of Identity

One mother in the study, Devika Roy, who teaches at a local high school, explained her understanding of the place of cultural identity in the schooling experiences of children from diverse backgrounds in these words -

[e] These three schools did not consent to participate in the research, hence no pseudonym was given to them.

> "If the children are in a school where there are a very few students like them, sometimes they don't want to stand out and do something that is different from everyone else. They look for avenues, that is if other people are doing different things, they might want to stand up and do something... It depends upon how they identify themselves and how they relate with different groups or cliques that the students form. So the kids really like to fit into some group or the other. There are some kids who are very individualistic, they do their own thing and are very secure about themselves, and they don't care about what goes on in mainstream high school culture. But most of the kids want to fit into some sort of group with whom they can identify themselves."

This tendency to "fit in" and a need to "belong to a group" leads to a gradual evolution of a bi-cultural lifestyle for children like the ones participating in this study. In Devika's words, the situation can be explained as one where the children would probably "do more of their cultural stuff at home and not at school." Devika's views are also based on her personal experience of being born and raised in the U.S.

According to Veena Sharma, a physician, the first problem many Americans have while "dealing with foreigners" is pronouncing their names. She said:

> "They would never pronounce your name correctly – never, ever. If you are not a Smith or a Robert, or Jim or John, forget it - your name is going to be slaughtered. When I am expected to say an American name correctly, why can't they do the same too? I think that it is just plain narrow-mindedness not to try to say the names correctly. They may try to pronounce French or Italian words correctly, especially the food. Why can't they do the same with Taj Mahal? Or with Himalayas?"

While pointing out such expressions of Eurocentrism in American society and schools, Veena also believes that many times the problem begins with Indians themselves who have "slaughtered" or changed their names to make them sound easier for the American vocal chords, or sometimes in an attempt to "hide their identity" or "become just like somebody else." She told me about many of her acquaintances and friends throughout the US who have changed or shortened their names to "sound more American."

The Anand children, Rahul and Vrinda talked about their experiences with the name issue in school. They both agreed that it takes people a little while to understand their names and most of them never ever say it correctly – even after they have said it many times. Vrinda told me that her name is often confused with an oriental food item, and many people keep calling her that,

though she has often told them the correct pronunciation of her name.[1] Rahul talked about his name-struggle with some of the substitute teachers who don't know children's names -

> "When they are going through the roll, as soon as there is a hesitation on the teacher's part in saying a name, my hand is already up, because I know it is my name. I have always known that – since kindergarten. The teacher will start saying – A… or she would say - the last name is ... And my hand is already up."

One elementary teacher agreed that often teachers are not able to correctly pronounce the names of some of their students who are from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. She confessed that often teachers and other children modify or "cut short" some of the names for their convenience, "which is not right." She put herself in these children's shoes when she said –

> "I won't change my name because someone couldn't say it. This is my name, this is who I am. It is really hard for me to move to a country and have somebody say to me, this is what I am going to call you because your name is too hard for me to pronounce."

This teacher believes that some kind of in-service for teachers must be provided on a regular basis in order to make them "more culturally sensitive," especially in schools that have a large proportion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such awareness can begin with helping teachers learn to pronounce the students' names correctly.

Rahul and Vrinda told me that most of their friends know their names correctly, and they often correct the teacher or any new visitor in the class. Vrinda also brought up the point raised by Veena Sharma about changing names to "become more American." She told me about her Japanese friend who now has an English name because she thought that her name was too hard for everyone to pronounce. She added - "Another boy had changed his name too, but then his parents found out, so he had to change it back to his real name. They just change their names to be part of…" At the age of 11, Vrinda may not be able to verbalize what it is that these children want to be a part of, but she is sure that she doesn't want to change her name to be a part of that.

The level of comfort of the children in this study with respect to expressing their cultural identity in some visible form in their schools is an important consideration in understanding their sense of identity. Reema Anand told me that her daughter, Vrinda occasionally carries Indian food for lunch at school. She also told me that when Vrinda was younger, she would always

---

[1]During the data collection, at one time one of my officemate took a message for me when Vrinda's teacher called to reschedule an appointment. The message also included something about Vrinda. It was surprising to see that the note on my desk said the same word that Vrinda's name is often confused with.

wear *salwaar-kameez* to her class on the first day of the school year, though she has not done that for the last two years. Reema thinks that her daughter is very comfortable with expressing her Indian identity, "and is not ashamed or embarrassed about it." About her son, Rahul, Reema feels that "boys are little more conscious than girls about some of these things, though he also used to occasionally carry Indian food for lunch at school, but only when he was younger." Reema herself feels perfectly comfortable in wearing a *sari* or *salwaar-kameez* to her children's schools. She talked about some of her Indian friends "who will always change into some western dress whenever they have to go to their children's schools."

Schools and classrooms provide some opportunities for children and parents to express some of the visible aspects of their cultural identities. Teachers and principals that I interviewed talked about the many classroom activities that involve displays of ethnic food, native costumes, and artifacts on special occasions. A couple of years ago, a "multicultural day" was celebrated in Priyanka Roy's school, when each classroom was transformed into a microcosm of a particular country. Priyanka's presence in the classroom led her kindergarten teacher to "do India." The children were taught a few things about India, and they also read some books and stories about India. Priyanka's mother, Devika, helped the teacher in setting up the room, displaying things, and making it look like a museum on India. Devika said – "When people walked in, it kind of gave them some flavor of India. And they also had little bit taste of some Indian food that I helped prepare." Devika, who herself does not wear a *bindi* to her work, felt a sense of pride in informing me that ever since this particular India Day celebration in kindergarten, Priyanka has felt very proud about wearing a *bindi* to her school.

During the course of this research, Priyanka, now 8, carried *Tabla* (a percussion instrument comprised of two medium-sized drums) for a show-and-tell activity in her class. Earlier in the year, she had also shared some treasured pictures from her family album with her class. These pictures were taken at a special musical event that was held for Priyanka's grandmother's memorial service in India. The pictures depicted the rituals performed at the event, and also the special musical instruments that were played at the service. Devika proudly told me that carrying the *Tabla* to the school and sharing the family pictures were Priyanka's own ideas for show-and-tell activities. Last year Priyanka also performed a Bengali folk dance for her school variety show, which got a "very positive response" from by the audiences.

Priyanka's sense of comfort and pride in expressing her cultural identity became visible to me in one of my visits to her second-grade gifted classroom. When I first started going to her class, I found out that the children had been working on their "autobiographies." One of the things that children were supposed to have in their "autobiography folders" was a self-portrait. These self-portraits were displayed on a wall near the chalkboard. Two of the self-portraits displayed *bindis* on the foreheads. I immediately assumed that one of them was Priyanka's and that the other belonged to her friend – the other Asian Indian girl in the class. As the children were getting into their small groups for their reading time activity, I got an opportunity to talk to this other Asian Indian girl. She pointed out her self-portrait to me, but interestingly she didn't identify it as the one with the *bindi*. She identified it with the color of the dress in the picture. And when I commented that she was wearing a *bindi* in the picture, she said that she sometimes like to wear her mom's *bindi* at home. And then she said - "The one on the top with the *bindi* is Priyanka's, and she is my best friend, so we put our portraits together." Priyanka's father, Debraj believes that children like Priyanka and her friend go through a "kind of identity-searching phase." He told me that at their age, these children are "still very open" about expressing themselves, because they haven't "felt or seen any touch of prejudice." Debraj added that as these children grow up, their experiences of different kinds would shape the way they feel about their cultural identity and its expression. Debraj and Devika believe that it is their responsibility to keep their eyes and ears open to see and to hear what their children are experiencing and talking about, as they go into higher grade levels and as they are begin to face the "real world."

Another aspect of expressing the cultural identity in school relates to what others in the schools know about Indian culture or traditions. Through my interviews with some of the teachers at the Lindbloom High, which has a higher proportion of Asian Indian students than any other Asian group, I found that most people in the school knew about Chinese New Year and some classrooms also had special celebrations on that day, but hardly any non-Indian student knew about important Indian holidays. One teacher commented on the situation –

> "We have a substantial Jewish population here and when the Jewish holidays come around, everybody around here knows we're into the Jewish holidays, Hanukkah, Yom Kippur, whatever. I know there's Chinese New Year and now I also know when the Persian New Year is, but I don't know anything about any of the Indian holidays or big celebrations. We celebrate black history month, and we have lots of African-American events but there is nothing to celebrate any Indian feast or holiday."

This teacher suggested that one way to make the students aware of some of the important Indian cultural traditions was to use Asian Indian parents as resource persons in arranging some celebrations at school. The teacher added that organizing Indian celebrations at school could also be a good way for Asian Indian parents to get involved in the school and to express their cultural identity. She gave an example of how some Persian children who were in her class last year got together to celebrate Persian New Year in the class. She also talked about some of the ways in which these children's parents were involved in the entire presentation. Referring to that experience as "the greatest kind of learning one can hope for in a school setting," the teacher emphasized the school's role in making children aware of different cultural traditions

Most parents in the study believed that "numbers make a difference" in terms of being a "visible minority" in the school and getting represented in the school's attempts to "multiculturalize" its curriculum and learning environment. But Devika also talked about an observation that could indicate a slightly more open-ness on part of the schools to include some aspects of the Indian culture in students' overall learning experiences -

> "The situation may be actually changing, I have seen that sometimes the word Diwali comes up on its own from *them* [speaker's emphasis] – not from the Indians, but from the school's end when there is some talk about Indian holidays. Some of the teachers and students understand or at least know a little about it."

Devika told me that just recently her older daughter's girl scouts' leader, an American, wanted her to talk about *Diwali*. Devika found it interesting that the scouts' leader actually knew about Diwali and came up with the idea of Priyanka's presentation on her own. Following that, Priyanka also did the *Diwali* presentation at a show-and-tell activity in her classroom.

Lindbloom High School, which has about 9% Asian Indian, and 18% Asian students in its student population provides several opportunities for children from diverse cultural backgrounds to express their cultural identity in different ways. The school has an Asian American club that meets every week and organizes various activities to create awareness of Asian American cultures. According to a feature article about Asian American awareness movement in high schools, published in May 1995 issue of the school newspaper, Lindbloom High was the first high school among all the schools in the district and its neighboring communities to start an Asian American club in 1993. At the time of the study an Asian Indian student was the club's secretary-treasurer.

Lindbloom High also has a Multi Ethnic Club, which organizes different activities to celebrate the various cultures represented in school's student population. I attended one such presentation on India done by a couple of Asian Indian students under the sponsorship of this Multi Ethnic Club. Of the two Asian Indian girls who were presenting this particular session during the lunchtime meeting of the club, the parents of one had migrated from northern part of India, whereas the other girl's parents were originally from the southern part of India. The girls took turns talking briefly about various visible aspects of Indian culture - food (variety in Indian food and cooking styles, differences in northern and southern styles of cooking), dress (what is a *sari*; different materials used to make *saris* - silk, cotton, chiffon and so on; hand-woven and machine-made *sarees*; names of a couple of places in India famous for *sarees;* other popular women's dresses such as *salwar-kameez, lehnga;* traditional adornments such as *bindi, sindoor, anklets, bichoo*; and the modern trends in fashion), religion (Hinduism, Islam), holidays and festivals (*Durga Puja, Diwali, Navratri, Holi*), houses (big and small houses, flats, huts, villages, domestic servants), school system (LKG – Lower Kindergarten, UKG – Upper Kindergarten, system of public examinations after 10th grade and 12th grade, higher academic rigor in schools in India as compared to "more fun" in American schools; one of the girls said – "but I like it here, though we may not learn as much here as in India"), and films (songs and dance sequences, most popular story line - love triangle, the hero saving the heroine from the villian, rain sequence and heroine's chiffon *sari*, "art" and off-beat cinema, films based on some social cause and so on).

One of the presenters had brought one of her mother's *sarees* to show to the audience. One teacher present in the audience asked a question about the *sari* - whether it was hand-woven or machine-made, the student replied that it was hand-made. The presenters had also brought in a lot of food – *pulao* (rice garnished with peas and nuts), *chhole* (chickpeas cooked with Indian spices), *aloo subzi* (potatoes cooked with onions and tomatoes), *bhel* (a spicy Indian snack), and tamarind chutney – most of which was cooked by their mothers. Two girls were putting food in paper plates and passing them around. The presenters had also brought some expensive catalogues from a couple of designer stores in India and passed them around for everyone to see the different kinds of dresses modeled by Indian supermodels. There were some comic books based on stories and legends from ancient Hindu scriptures including epics such as *Mahabharata, Ramayana,* and *Panchtantra* for everyone to look at and skim through. Both the girls were very much interested in talking about Indian films and they also showed some clips

from the videos that they had brought with them and also offered brief explanations of these video clips. About 20 students, including two other Asian Indian girls, came to attend this presentation. Neither of the two children who were participating in my research and who attended this school came for the presentation. As I thanked the teacher-in-charge for letting me attend this presentation, she told me about an upcoming presentation on Indian films which was being planned by one of presenters from that day.

During one of my visits to this school, I noticed a couple of display boards on the wall near the south gate of the building. These display boards marked the Asian-American Awareness Month, and contained information on different Asian cultures ranging from the flags of different Asian countries to some interesting details about well-known Asian film personalities. There were also a number of magazine clippings, articles, and pictures celebrating the achievements of many Asian Americans in a variety of professions from business to entertainment.

Visible expressions of identity such as those described above are not always favorably received by everyone. The principal of Lindbloom High mentioned in one of our conversations that a few days after these display boards representing Asian-American Awareness Month were up, she noticed that the word "Asian" in "Asian American" had been struck across and replaced with "American," so that it became "American American." This, according to her, was probably the work of some students who were expressing their unhappiness over Asian American students expressing their identity in school so visibly. This kind of thing, she said, happens occasionally because a "certain group of people have a little hard time accepting the concept of hyphenated identity of others." She indicated that it is disturbing to see these kinds of things at a school that has a diverse student population, and that emphasizes multiculturalism, tolerance, and respect for all. In her opinion, the only way to avoid such things is to work harder to make students and the community aware of the potential problems racial and ethnic prejudices can cause, and by promoting the values of acceptance and respect toward all people.

As an insider to the public school system in the community, Devika Roy told me that more and more schools are "getting into the ideas of cultural diversity, knowing about other cultures, and sensitivity to other cultures." She talked about an in-service workshop in her high school that focused on the issues of dealing with diversity in schools. One of the presentations in the workshop was done by a district-level Asian-American administrator who gave a talk for the

teachers on the Asian-American cultural perspective and warned them against stereotyping the Asian American students as "model minorities."

At Flower Elementary School I came across some interesting information about the cultural sensitivity training that some teachers and administrators had received in their effort to understand and respect the diversity that surrounds their school. I saw a notice on the "staff development" bulletin board that informed teachers of a workshop called Project Reach. Later when I had an opportunity to talk to the principal about it, he told me that he and some teachers from the school had attended that workshop and found it very useful. The workshop provided some insights into different cultures – Asian, Hispanic, and African-American. The guest speakers represented different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The participants were also given a lot of printed information about different cultural perspectives. The principal thought that the workshop "really raised [the participants'] level of awareness." He lent me some of the material from the workshop, and as it turned out, the book on the "Asian American Perspectives" had nothing in it about the Asian Indian perspective. When I shared this observation with the principal in another meeting, he told me that this finding makes my research all the more important. The absence of an Asian Indian perspective in the book on Asian American perspectives perpetuates the stereotypical view that combining all Asian Americans into one category will allow researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to comprehend the commonalties in their cultural perspectives.

Vijay Anand believes that the schooling experiences of Asian Indian children are often marked with ethnic isolation. He used his experience as a university professor to observe that ethnic or cultural background determines to a large extent the group of friends most of the students hang out with – "It is not only true for Indians, it is true for everybody. Blacks move separately, Hispanics move separately, Chinese move separately." Vijay believes that as children grow up, they are able to perceive and understand the cultural differences between them and other children in schools, and start associating more with people whom they feel comfortable with. Veena Sharma also shared her observation that "there is a lot of segregation in schools." She admitted, however, that although her children haven't "suffered" because they have always attended schools and classrooms that have had enough diverse student populations, she has often heard about incidents instigated by ethnic prejudices in public schools.

Vijay Anand illustrated his point about ethnic isolation by sharing his experience with the celebration of "International Day" in her daughter's school (Greensville) -

> "The school people think that they have a big international community in the school, so they should have an international day. But I have noticed that most American parents think that since this is international day, they need not come for that. As a result, no White person comes to the event, only the foreigners come. The idea is that if there is an international day, it is not only for international people, it should be actually more important for those people who don't know about these foreign cultures. But it is just the other way around. Only international people show up, and there is nobody else except the school people. So there is no opportunity of interaction with other parents, and the whole point of having an international day is lost. I am sure that it was not intended to be this way, but that is what usually happens."

Vijay believes that events like International Day can provide a forum to bring parents from different backgrounds together, as well as become a powerful way of sharing knowledge about different cultures.

Representations of Identity

Imagine a gifted second-third grade combined classroom in which children are working on their autobiography folders. This is a project that the class has been doing for a while. At the beginning of the project the teacher explained to the class what an autobiography was and gave them a copy of the list of themes they should be incorporating in their autobiographies. This list, which is also pasted on the front of a closet door in the classroom, contains ten themes: "Birth Information, Firsts (teeth, words, steps, etc.), Information about your immediate family, Where you have lived, Early memories you have about something important to you, School experiences, Hobbies, Pets, What you would like to be when you grow up, and Memories about ancestors." Every day the children work on their autobiography folders and write on one of these themes during an assigned time in the class. On one particular day, as they are working on their autobiography folders, the teacher calls on each child to tell the class his or her place of birth. The teacher then marks that place with a push-pin on the U.S. or World Map displayed on a wall. She then uses a roll of yarn to join together all the marked points on the maps so that it becomes one big circle.

The next time I am in this classroom at Flower Elementary, the teacher asks the children to go to the playground where she takes a picture of every child. The children are also asked to

bring a book with them for silent reading while the teacher is taking individual pictures. These individual pictures will be put in the autobiography folder of each child. During yet another visit to this classroom I see a huge display of children's self-portraits on one of the walls in the room. These self-portraits, which are also a part of the autobiography folders, were painted using "people colors" - some special colors that the teacher had ordered for the class. The children had mixed different shades of these colors to match their skin tones to paint their self-portraits.

As a prelude to this project on autobiographies, the children in this class had worked on a family tree project. For that, the teacher had asked for direct involvement of parents in helping children gather some information about their grandparents and other ancestors. While discussing this project, the teacher told me that it was important for children to know their ancestral heritage "because everybody in this country is an immigrant in some way." By doing a project on children's autobiographies and family trees, the teacher believed that she was helping them get in touch with their cultural identities and roots. I had an opportunity to look at the autobiography folder of Priyanka Roy who was a student in this class. In addition to some interesting information about her parents, grandparents, sister, and an uncle's dog, she had also written that she got her name because her parents liked the meaning of that particular word in their native language. The autobiography project meant something special for this little girl who found the cultural meaning of her name and its significance for her parents.

The above examples clearly highlight the creative ways in which curriculum was made relevant and meaningful for all the children irrespective of their backgrounds. But this was only one project in one classroom. Not all classrooms do or can provide similar opportunities to all the children at all occasions. In the same classroom that is described above, during a show and tell session, when the teacher showed a book on the tradition of quilting in America, the children who had not seen their "grandmother's quilts" (because their grandmothers are in a different country) or those who were not familiar with the patterns that are "traditional" to most Americans were not able to participate in the discussion. This particular session could have been a good opportunity for the teacher to include a brief discussion about a similar, yet distinct tradition of making quilts or other sewing crafts in other parts of the world. Children from non-American homes could have been asked to talk with their parents about any traditional quilts or other similar sewing projects they could share with the class. But this was not done, so the

discussion about quilting continued with only those children who had seen such quilts at their homes or in their grandmothers' homes.

Some teachers at Lindbloom High believe that most often the curriculum ignores many non-Western cultures and countries altogether. One teacher confessed that many times students belonging to minority cultures do not find their cultural and ethnic heritage represented in the school curriculum. She told me that some students have "brought it to the teachers' attention how Western our History sequence is." She added that some students have also told the teachers that they want something in the curriculum that at least recognizes and acknowledges the numerous developments in their native cultures. As a result, changes are being made in the curriculum to bring in the rest of the world in the social studies curriculum to give students more of a "global perspective on things." This teacher explained how the integration of diverse viewpoints could be easily accomplished in the curriculum –

> "For example, when you talk about imperialism, a lot of what you get is the Western view of Oriental people – Chinese, Japanese or whatever and usually these views are not very complimentary. But we have also noticed that if you search hard enough, you can find other opinions. There are many such writings that are now being published... To be honest, it takes longer to do these things, because a teacher is always deciding how is she or he going to fit everything in a way that makes sense to everyone and also how much of the other needs to be cut down or reorganized."

The teacher felt confident that the students and the school have benefited from attempts to "diversify" the curriculum, and that it is "worth all the effort in the long run."

Parents in this study had some definite observations and opinions about the issue of representation in the school curriculum. Vijay Anand, a university professor raised the issue of the relevance of the curriculum for students with diverse cultural backgrounds. He believes that even children like his, who are born and brought up in the U.S., who have no problems with the English language, and who are in many ways, part of the mainstream American culture, can have a home culture that is very different from the one represented in their classrooms. He said –

> "There might be things said or done in the classes that some children may not be able to relate with. If we look at whatever is being taught in the class – most of it has nothing to do with our kids' backgrounds or families or home culture."

He understands that even though the people who are in the position to make changes in school curricula and policies may want to do something, they often don't know what to do because of their lack of knowledge about foreign cultures.

Devika Roy, a high school teacher herself, believes that "school boards and schools in general are trying to get more and more into multicultural things." She talked about a new program at her high school, which involves "picking up one day every month to have some ethnic menu for the school lunch." Devika added that so far most of the "multicultural" attempts in schools have generally concentrated on African-American culture. She said that the word "Asian" has always been more closely associated with the cultures of people from Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, and more recently with people from Vietnam. Since there were fewer Asian Indian students in schools, not much emphasis had been "given to their culture."

In her experience with her children's schools, Neeta Shah has not come across any occasion when anything related to India or Indian history or culture was discussed or taught in her daughters' classes. The only exception she could think of was a unit in the Social Studies class that dealt with "other parts of the world." Shruti Sharma, who is a junior at Lindbloom High, told me that the only thing she ever read about India in her high school was a chapter in her History class that dealt with the period of British rule in India. She said –

> "That ticked me off because [textbooks] don't recognize India before British went over there. India had been there for a long long time; but we never learnt anything about the India before British rule period. India was totally ignored in the schools when I was in elementary and middle school. Half the kids in elementary grades could not tell where India was on the globe. They knew where Africa was, because we had African-American Awareness month, they knew the names of 500 African tribes... about India, they only knew the name Gandhi, as if that is the whole history of India - in Gandhi. Whenever they used to ask us to do some sort of report or essay on some hero or leader, I was the only one who used to write about Gandhi – always - because that was the only thing I was a little familiar with. So that was just it."

Shruti told me that it was not until a couple of years ago that she first realized that she had never learned about India in any of her classes. That bothered her a lot especially when she started going to Lindbloom High, which has quite a diverse student population. She talked about her dissatisfaction with the history curriculum in these words –

> "We were supposed to learn about Chinese Revolution. We have also learned about Russia, England, France, Germany, all of that. And we even learned about Japan and

> Korea. India was just mentioned so briefly and that too in connection with British rule, I can't get over that... I talked to my teacher about it because it really ticked me off."

Shruti also expressed her desire to see India and Indians represented in the curriculum in more positive light. She told me that some other Asian Indian students in her school have also talked about this issue among themselves and with the teachers. She gave an example of how India is represented in one of her textbooks –

> "The way sometimes things are written in the textbooks is amazing. There was this line in the text that said something like – the British army of 1000 soldiers defeated 200,000 Bengalis. It bothered me that the book didn't mention that the Bengalis were farmers, and that they did not have any weapons. It didn't mention that the British soldiers had the training, guns, and other weapons, but the Bengali farmers had rakes and sticks... The books portray India as so underdeveloped, they don't find any development there. Many people actually still think that in India people live on trees... And they think that whole India is like a dust city...they don't see India's beauty in any way, they just see India as this over-populated, half-starving, underdeveloped poor country. I don't blame them, because they never got to learn about it whatsoever."

Shruti strongly believes that changes must be made in the curriculum to include content about places like India, which are underrepresented or misrepresented - "I think the schools can't just talk about Africa and China; they also need to talk about other places."

Shruti is not alone in her concern about the skewed representation of India in textbooks. Her Math teacher shared with me his opinions on the ways certain stereotypes are reinforced by many textbooks, which in their attempt to become more multicultural, often do so in a "really awkward" manner. He explained –

> "I have used textbooks which try to be multicultural, and they would throw in names like Juan and Pedro, and they also make sure that there are women in the word problems, but a lot of times it is a biased representation. When there are women in the word problems, a lot of times it has something to do with a problem in the kitchen or sewing. And if Juan is in the word problem, he is working on an automobile. There are problems, which start with something like - Juan and Pedro are mowing the lawn. I believe that these things are just reinforcing the stereotypes."

This teacher added that he had not seen any mathematical word problem in any textbook that started with Asian Indian sounding name, or was about any Asian Indian related theme – "like making a *curry*, or weaving a *sari*." He was also not sure how some of his Indian students would

react to a problem rooted in some aspect of their culture, and he wondered how much these children actually knew about their Indian culture.

Veena Sharma thinks that schools generally don't do a good job of educating children about different countries and cultures. She believes that most Americans probably know very little about India. For instance, they may know a little bit about Gandhi because of the movie that was made about him; or some of them may be familiar with things such as Indian silk or jewelry. Veena told me that she gets very cynical at times when somebody asks her "some stupid question like if we have cars in India." Her cynicism sometimes prompts the response – "No, don't you know we live on trees, and we swing from branch to branch like monkeys?" In one of my observations at Williamsburg Elementary, I witnessed an episode that authenticates some of the sentiments expressed by Veena. The excerpts from the field notes are presented below:

October 23 - 9:50 AM
Combined 4th and 5th grade combined classroom – Art Class

A university art education student has been coming to this classroom once a week to work with children on different art projects. This is a part of her requirements in a class that she is taking in her department. Today's topic is "Line Drawing and Types of Transportation." The children are supposed to draw and paint different means of transportation using different kinds of lines – straight, crooked, dotted, dashed, curved, etc. The student-teacher asks children what different types of transportation they can think of. Children come up with all sorts of things – car, van, bus, bike, boat, airplane, helicopter, skateboard, skis, truck, balloon, camel, elephant and so on. The student-teacher who has been acknowledging what the children are saying, comments at the mention of elephant – "yeah, elephant, if you are in India."

My immediate response to this comment: Is this what the student-teacher knows about India? Will the children listening to her accept the fact that people in India use elephants as a means of transportation? Should I as an Asian-Indian observer in the class correct the student-teacher? (I decide not to say anything and just observe).

The class goes on, and the student-teacher explains the assignment for the day.

Though this is just one example of the ignorance of many educated Americans about India, it clearly illustrates the point that Veena and other parents in this study made again and again. The situation takes on a more serious aspect when we see this ignorance being passed on to the children in schools. Veena strongly feels that such a lack of awareness about India and other countries is something that schools should and can alleviate by making their curriculum more inclusive and broad. She is highly critical of the way American history is taught in her daughter's high school –

> "I think that the children today should be taught more about the History of the World rather than US history. It is only two hundred years of US history, and they study that throughout the semester, and they simply ignore the thousands of years of history of so many other places in the world."

Vijay Anand offered some suggestions that could help modify the curriculum and school policies in ways that could provide more opportunities for minority kids "to feel a part of the system." He said that people who are setting up the school policies often don't have any idea of what it is like for children like his – who are growing up as American teenagers in Indian homes, and have a strong sense of Indian identity. He suggested –

> "I think that education is the key – these people who are setting the curricula, or setting the policies have no education about foreign cultures, and how these kids are brought up. But surely, it can help if there is involvement of people from different cultures in policy-making and decision-making roles like in committees and things like that. Then, I think, we can educate others about our culture, and suggest what needs to be done for different groups. But what if we are not there?"

The lack of representation and active involvement of people from the Asian Indian community in policy-making discussions in schools is an important finding.

Shruti believes that getting parents involved in schools and advocating for increased and positive representation of India and Indian culture in school curriculum is a "great idea." But she was not very optimistic about the effect on the school policies –

> "I don't think that would change things in school much, but that may make things a little better in future. I mean if I meet a 10-year old and he knows that Indians don't speak Indian, I would be so overjoyed. But right now even this thing is not there. Another and even more important thing is that a lot of Indians don't care too much to get involved, because their kids already know about Indian culture and that is all that matters to them."

Shruti and also fourteen-year old Sangeeta Shah do not fit in the category of Asian Indian children who know a lot about their Indian heritage and culture. Sangeeta told me that she would be "really like everybody else" in her class – ignorant about Indian culture and India – if these things were discussed in her class. Not finding many opportunities at school to learn a little bit more about their cultures, these children must rely upon their families for this knowledge.

An art teacher at Greensville talked about a curriculum unit that she designed to explore Japanese Art in her fifth grade class this year. She told me that next year she would be

concentrating on (Asian) Indian Art, and that the idea to "do Indian Art" was actually introduced by the mother of an Asian Indian student in one of her classes. The teacher confessed that she is not much familiar with different styles of art in India – traditional and contemporary, and that there is a lot she needs to learn before she starts teaching about it in the class. The Asian Indian mother who initiated the idea has agreed to help the teacher in designing the curriculum unit on Indian Art. This episode suggests that parents' active involvement can bring in some success in getting representation.

The nature of curriculum in certain disciplines and courses is often an important factor in determining whether it is possible for a teacher to "incorporate" the cultures represented in the classroom. The U.S. history teacher at Lindbloom High told me that he has more flexibility in his senior seminar class where he works with individual students on a research topic of their choice. In that class he tries to encourage students to pick up "diverse topics" for their papers. He told me about one of his Asian Indian students who did her paper on "American reactions to and portrayal of Indian independence in magazines, press, whatever she can find." He also gave examples of other students who did projects on "Asian related" topics. The teacher admitted that these kinds of topics never get to be covered in a regular history class, largely because of the time constraint.

One of my observations in a fifth grade classroom reflected how an ordinary English lesson could be used to convey to students a need to understand and respect diversity in American society. The teacher prompted children to come up with a list of possible subjects they might want to interview for preparing a report for their English class. The children let their imaginations work and came up with a long list, which included babysitters, teachers, students, school athletes, housekeepers, WW II veterans, animal experts, and people from other countries. The teacher picked up the last example and started asking the children what kind of questions they would need to ask a person from another country if they were to prepare a report based on the interview. The children came up with things like housing, food, currency, religion, holidays, and so on. The teacher categorized these responses and explained how the structure of an interview-based report needed to be tied together by showing on the chalkboard the inter-linkages among the topics and sub-topics of the interview. In addition to teaching the children how to compose and write a report, this class also helped make them aware of some of the aspects that are part of an individual's cultural and ethnic identity. Though the lesson was not

directly related to any one particular cultural or ethnic background, it helped children realize the need for finding out more about diverse people who constitute the American society in general and their community in particular. The lesson also gave the children an insight into what they need to know about people who come from different countries.

The teacher in Sumita Shah's combined 4th-5th-grade classroom at Williamsburg Elementary told me about some of the ways she has tried to incorporate the diverse cultures represented in her class. She talked about a celebration called Ancestor Tea that was held in the classroom on Thanksgiving Day. This celebration provided the children an opportunity to research their ancestors' cultural origins. On the day of the Ancestor Tea, the children came dressed in the native costumes of the countries their ancestors had migrated from, and did a small presentation about that country. Dressed in an Indian costume that her mother helped her with, Sumita told an Indian folk-story to the children in her class on that day.

Devika Roy believes that constructing a curriculum to represent the diversity of students in the classroom also depends upon the teacher's personal initiative and his or her capability to make use of the given resources. She believes that there are many things teachers can do even with the demands of the standard curriculum - "It is possible, it is just that teachers shy away from doing such things because it takes a lot of extra preparation and time." The teacher in Devika's 8-year-old daughter's classroom confirmed this view when she admitted that to teach facts about other countries and cultures, a teacher must first do some research and know more about it, although it often does not occur because of inertia on the teacher's part. She gave another reason to explain some teachers' lack of interest in doing such things –

> "I think it is a part of the general American ignorance of other people's histories. We expect the world to speak English instead of we trying to learn other languages. I think that just the simple things like talking about different religions or calendars in the class can be useful for everybody."

As an Asian Indian teacher, who teaches math at a local high school, Devika has been thinking about designing a curriculum unit to "diversify" the history of mathematics as generally taught in high schools. In this unit, she wants to emphasize the facts that "certain mathematical concepts or principles were already existing in ancient cultures, and many of these things were discovered by some of the philosophers or mathematicians in countries like India many centuries before the modern world even knew about those things." Devika believes that the contributions

of these ancient cultures should not only be acknowledged and respected, but also discussed and taught in schools. Devika's interest in developing a curriculum unit that focuses on contributions of mathematicians from ancient cultures actually developed when she took a course in the history of mathematics in her undergraduate program in an American university. It was then that Devika, who was born and brought up in US, realized how little she knew about the contributions of Indian mathematicians –

> "They don't teach it in schools here. I did not even know that zero came from India until I took that class [in college]. I don't think anybody in my class or in school knows that zero came from India. In that class we read about lot more things that get unnoticed in Western world."

An important step that schools need to make in diversifying their curriculum, according to Devika, is to include discussion of the contributions that India and other countries have made in science and the arts. She believes that instead of focusing too much on things such as ethnic food, music, and holidays to multiculturalize the curriculum, schools should realize that it is important for children, Indian and American alike, to know what India has given to the world. Devika thinks that many people just see India as "a land of colorful dresses and dances." She gave an example of the lack of general awareness in schools that she came across early in her teaching career –

> "In the town where I lived earlier, I went to this school as a substitute teacher once. As I walked into this seventh grade classroom, the first thing the children asked me was – 'where are you from?' I told them I was from Massachusetts, but then somebody asked me – 'no, where are you from originally, what is your ethnic background?' I told them that I am from India. Then somebody asked me – 'what tribe do you belong to?' This other student said – 'she said she is from India, she is not an Indian (Native American), so she doesn't belong to a tribe.' It was amazing to see the ignorance of these 13-year-olds, but then this is a very small town where the exposure is very limited."

Devika feels that even in Jeffersonville with a large university community, the exposure to other cultures is limited, especially in the school where she is currently employed.

According to Devika, another way schools can provide a "broad exposure" to the children is by hiring more teachers "who are from different, diverse backgrounds than what are traditionally represented in schools." As an Asian Indian teacher, who grew up in the U.S., Devika is in a position to present a culturally different perspective to her students. She acknowledged that her presence in the class alone makes a difference in children's perception

and understanding of people who are different from them. In addition to her, there is another Asian Indian teacher in the same school building. While talking about her experiences as a teacher, Devika told me that initially her "identity interfered in getting along with some American students."

Manoj, the Asian Indian teacher at Lindbloom High School, whom I had an opportunity to interview, also talked about the need for a diverse faculty in schools. At the time of this study, Manoj was a graduate student who had been working at the school as a part-time teacher. Talking about his personal experiences as a teacher, he said that his identity as an Indian who grew up in the US, just like many of his Indian students, allowed them to feel little more comfortable in approaching him:

> "Even though our conversations are not necessarily about personal issues or issues related to being Indian in US, but they are more likely to come to me than to an American teacher if they want to talk about any concern they may have."

Manoj also emphasized that he is also able to relate to his American students "just fine" and that American children also feel comfortable in talking to him because he "grew up here, and so [he is] a part of their culture too." He, like all other teachers in the study, also stated that when he is in the classroom, his focus is only on what he is teaching or doing in the class, not on his ethnic identity or that of his students.

Manoj feels that his identity as an Asian Indian also influences his interactions with Asian Indian parents: "I have talked to some of the Indian parents at conferences, and I could just tell that they were able to relate to me very well. I could tell because the conversations were very much better than what I had with some of the American parents." The school principal also mentioned that soon after Manoj joined the Lindbloom faculty, she had overheard some Asian Indian students in the school refer to him as "one of us." The bi-cultural identity of teachers like Manoj and Devika has earned them an acceptance with those students who are dealing with issues of their own bi-cultural identities, as well as with their parents.

Discussion and Implications

"Why do kids have to know about all the details about every American president when there is so much more in the rest of the world that they can know about?" Trying to answer Veena Sharma's question can be a good starting point for modifying school curriculum to

recognize, respect and represent the different cultures and groups of people that make American society and American schools multicultural and diverse. Other parents and teachers also indicated a need and suggested ways for schools to diversify their curriculum. Morrow (1989) examined the importance of teaching about India, the place of India in the school curriculum, and strategies for teaching about India. He writes:

> "Although world history and global studies programs in American public schools have expanded in recent years--especially the study of East Asia--the treatment of India and South Asia have remained insufficient, laden with cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes... India, as a focus of study, provides students with the opportunity to examine an ancient civilization, the marvels of technology and advancement during later eras, and the continued struggle for improved conditions of human existence in a developing nation in the twentieth century."

This study presented voices of Asian Indian children and parents about their perceptions of expressions and representations of their individual and collective identities in a public context such as a school. These first-person accounts can be effectively used in curriculum examinations of race, ethnicity, and culture. The issue of representing identities of non-mainstream student population is closely tied with the identity formation of these students. Challenging the essentialist identity politics, several scholars in cultural studies, postcolonial and poststructuralist literary theory have argued that identities are constructed as categories through hegemonic discourses (Morrison, 1992; Jackson and Penrose, 1993; Bhabha, 1994). In other words, identity categories are themselves representations, are defined and contested, and at times naturalized through representational practices. Indian diasporic collective identity is partly constructed by the representations they see of their "imagined homeland" (India) in the media, school curriculum, and other public avenues where individual and collective identities are both presented and re-presented. A critical analysis of such presentations and representations in the school context, and especially in the curriculum provides a peek into how such identity is being shaped and even re-structured by the discourse constructed in schools. Such an analysis should focus on how the represented "Other" may be essentialized and stereotyped through these representations. It should also examine the acts of resistance against such essentialist and reductionist portrayals. Teachers can be instrumental in encouraging such acts of resistance in their own classrooms by creating safe spaces where students of different cultural and ethnic

backgrounds can engage in honest and respectful dialogue and discussion about the material presented in the textbooks.

Several important factors need to be considered when including histories of "other" peoples, and their histories and cultures in school curriculum. Presentation of a group's history impacts the recognition, representation, and even construction of the group's present identities. The constructionist approach to representation is a constructed process of meaning making practices (Hall, 1997). This approach allows us to consider several nuances of representations that are particularly relevant for curriculum development. Hall contends that the constructed process of representation is made possible by two systems of representation -- language and conceptual. Through its symbolic forms, language facilitates communication exchange and the sharing of meanings among users sharing a common language. The conceptual system of representation, refer to the socially and culturally derived conceptual maps individuals and groups have, and which correlate or explain the relationships among people, objects, events, and ideas. Another aspect of this process of representation is that of codes that mediate between the language and conceptual systems. These codes work to construct and fix meaning by linking and correlating language and conceptual systems so that words and concepts are consonant among users (Hall). These codes thus become instrumental in how power and ideology work to fix preferred or dominant meanings. "Representation, in connection with power, is centrally involved in what we become. There is neither identity nor alterity outside representation. Curriculum is, right there, in that exact point of intersection between power and representation, a site for the production of identity and of alterity. It is precisely here, at this point, that curriculum becomes a privileged terrain of struggle around representation" (Da Silva, 1999, p. 31).

It is important that those responsible for writing the curricula and textbooks do not end up constructing ideological representations--comprised of language, conceptual maps, and codes--to construct fixed and hegemonic meanings of Other histories, societies and cultures for future citizens of the world. It is also important to remember that individual representations of "others" do not stand alone but tie into, continue, and are part of the larger discourse. Building upon Foucauldian approach to discourse, which emphasizes the role of language in knowledge, Hall (1997) argues that discourse forms subjects, shapes them, and by setting limits and exerting pressures on the ways subjects will be represented contributes to the production of knowledge about them. Curriculum developers, textbook writers, and teachers operating within dominant

discourses and institutions must remember that textbooks construct certain representations of individuals, peoples, groups and events. As students and teachers engage with these textbooks, these representations become part of the political and cultural discourse about those individuals, peoples, groups and events. Blaut (1993) contends:

> "Textbooks are an important window into a culture; ...they are semiofficial statements of exactly what the opinion-forming elite of the culture want the educated youth of that culture to believe... European and Anglo-American history textbooks assert that most of the causes of historical progress occur, or originate, in the European sector of the world...This view still, in the main, prevails, although racism has been discarded and non-Europe is no longer considered to have been 'absolutely' stagnant and traditional."

Rosser (1999) has done a comprehensive study of several World History textbooks, and concluded that often Eastern cultures are introduced in the textbooks only when they come in contact with Western countries and cultures, for example via colonization. Focusing specifically on how India, Indian civilization and history is presented in the textbooks she selected for her analysis, she found lots of misinformation, essentialism, and over-emphasis on the strange, the exotic and the extreme – represented as the norm for the culture. Combining her own experience as an MA student in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin with her critical analysis of selected textbooks, she concludes:

> "The treatment or maltreatment that Indian and non-Western regions of the world receive in U.S. World History textbooks, the lack of preparedness of many U.S. teachers to teach about India, and the checkered history of Area Studies, all indicate that the study of Asia, and other areas of the non-Western world, has suffered through various rationales and has been subjected to perceived changes in national interest. Regardless of these factors, most school districts mandate lessons about Asia as part of the required curriculum. How the history and culture of India are actually taught, however, leave much to be desired."

Some of the voices heard in my study seem to convey a similar message. Knowledgeable and socially engaged Indian-Americans can play an important role in collaborating with schools, educational researchers and policy-makers for conducting more of such critical analyses and making a case for change.

Swartz (1992) argues that early efforts at multicultural education have largely been compensatory attempts to address inequities in cultural representation. What is needed is a rewriting of the entire master script of curriculum to eliminate implicit racism, classism, and sexism. The representations of identities may also influence how comfortable children feel in expressing their identities at school. Meaningful multicultural curriculum should not deal with

the "Other" in an additive, exotic way where the "Other" is always a periphery to the Center (Europe/West). Thus, the practices of International Day, ethnic food fairs, museum-like displays of non-Western cultures must be critically re-examined by schools and educators. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998) argue that the moment a group is categorized as being "ethnic," it implies that the group lies outside the mainstream, it is a group that is not "traditionally identified with the dominant national mythology" (p. 82). Gupt (1997) argues that the ancient Greek word, *ethnos*, acquired a very different connotation when it was used by modern European anthropologists and sociologists for describing civilizations under colonial domination. "Ethnos, came to denote a non-European, civilizationally less complicated community (as in South America, Africa or Australia), or a less technocratized society (as in Asia or China), which also objectified as the Other of the white man." It is this Western understanding of the term 'ethnic' that must be critically explored and challenged by educators, curriculum developers and textbook writers. The types of 'ethnic' displays of identity by the parents and children, and the "Indian" presentations I witnessed at some schools can prove to be good cases to study for all students. Teachers must take an active role in starting a discourse about these 'ethnic exotica.' Based on her comprehensive study of Indian immigrants in Chicago, Rangaswamy (2000) writes:

> "The commonalities and connections among Indians and the different ethnic groups in Chicago also show that Indian immigrants must be seen in the overall context of American history and not confined to the areas of "ethno-history" or "Asian Studies," which automatically assign them secondary or peripheral status. When seen in the context of their global connections, it is apparent that they are integral part of Indian and world history, too" (p. 334).

Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (1998) succinctly state that in the Western popular consciousness the Indian subcontinent tends to evoke two contrary images. On the one hand it is lauded as an ancient land of mystery and romance, extraordinary wealth and profound spirituality. On the other hand it is denounced for its irrationality and inhumanity and derided for its destitution and squalor. Nandy (1994) reminds us that the "Orient" was a construction serving as the inversion of the "West" and representing the projection of the shadow side of Western culture. The needs of colonialism, he argues, defined Western and Eastern images as reverses of each other, with the East being portrayed as poetic, mystical, irrational, uncivilized and feminine. While teaching about "Eastern" cultures, such critical interpretations must be part of the discourse. Critical pedagogy that initiates the teaching and learning process through dialogue and

the democratization of authority would allow the experiences and the contexts implied by them to become part of the teaching and learning process. By listening and learning from the students, the teacher not only legitimizes students' experiences, but also opens herself to critique and contestation. Thus both students and teachers will be held accountable for their ideas and beliefs.

The voices expressed by the students participating in this study represent some good examples of the voices that are currently being ignored. These voices need to be included in a classroom where teachers employ critical pedagogy and encourage reflexive and critical dialogue. They can be also seen as starting points for suggestions on how a more democratic and inclusive learning environment could be created in a classroom. As pointed out by a high school teacher, assigning appropriate research, reflexive writing and speaking activities to students could also lead to more meaningful learning while at the same time allowing teachers to recognize the diverse identities and cultures represented in the classroom. The voices present in this paper suggest that the representations and expressions of Asian Indian identity in schools are closely linked to each other. Children and parents described and also challenged the essentialist portrayals of their culture, history, and identities. Teachers acknowledged the need for critical pedagogy, and Asian Indian teachers presented reasons for having diverse faculty in schools.

Finally, a word of caution is in order. The words "identity" and "culture" could also imply a rigid, unchanging, monolithic understanding. The instrumentalization of a blocked concept of cultural identity could have far more harmful consequences in practice: it is one reason why the initially positive concept of multiculturalism has turned today into a growing problem and is even negatively valued. Multiculturalism and the quest for ethnic identity is increasingly acquiring all the trappings of a fad, playing to the symphony of the mainstream. As Nandy (1994) warned, "The modern West has produced not only its servile imitators and admirers but also its circus-tamed opponents and its tragic counterplayers performing their last gladiator-like acts of courage in front of appreciative Caesars." Cultural dance performances, Little India presentations, ethnic food festivals, and multicultural days in schools - all can be seen as circus-tamed gladiator performances, simplistically speaking. But situating these in appropriate historical and cultural contexts and struggles could further a more holistic and critical understanding of the "Other."

References

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H (1998). *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, New York: Routledge.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.

Blaut, J. M. (1993). *The Colonizer's model of the world: Geographical diffusionism and Eurocentric history*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Bose, S. & Jalal, A. (1998). *Modern South Asia: History, culture, and political economy*. London: Routledge.

Bromley, R. (2000). *Narratives for a new belonging: Diasporic cultural fictions*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh.

Commins, N. L. (1992). Parents and public schools: The experiences of four Mexican immigrant families. *Equity and Choice, 8 (2),* 40-45.

Da Silva, T. T. (1999). The poetics and politics of curriculum as representation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society,* 7 (1), 7-33.

Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1992). School matters in Mexican-American home: Socializing children to education. *American Educational Research Journal, 29,* 495-513.

Gupt, B. (1997). What is ethnic. *The Eastern Anthropologist, 50* (2), 139-46.

Gutmann, A. (1994). Introduction. In C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jackson, P. and Penrose, J. (1993). Placing 'race' and nation. In Jackson, P. and Penrose, J., (Eds.), *Constructions of race, place and nation*, London: UCL Press, 1–26.

Hall, S. (Ed.) (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.

Lee, J. F. J. (1991). *Asian Americans: Oral histories of first to fourth generation Americans from China, the Philippines, Japan, India, the Pacific Islands, Vietnam and Cambodia*, New York: The New Press.

Morrison, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Morrow, R. S. (1989). *Teaching about India*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No.

ED 304 397

Nandy, A. (1994, first published 1983), *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Ogbu, J. U. (1991). Immigrant and involuntary minorities in comparative perspective. In M. A. Gibson & J. U. Ogbu (Eds.), *Minority status and schooling: A comparative study of immigrant and voluntary minorities* (pp. 3-33). New York: Garland.

Pandurang, (2001). Cross-cultural texts and diasporic identities: Review of Roger Bromley's 'Narratives for a New Belonging' *Jouvert, 6 (1-2)*. [Online] Available at http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v6i1-2/bromle.htm [Retrieved on June 6, 2002].

Rangaswamy, P. (2000). Namasté America: Indian immigrants in an American metropolis. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Rosser, Y. C. (1999). Stereotypes in schooling: Negative pressures in American educational system. [Online]. Available at http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_es/s_es_rosse_school_frameset.htm [Retrieved June 1, 2002].

Suarez-Orozco, M. M. (1991). Immigrant adaptation to schooling: A Hispanic case. In M. A. Gibson & J. U. Ogbu (Eds.), *Minority status and schooling: A comparative study of immigrant and voluntary minorities* (pp. 37-61). New York: Garland.

Swartz, E. (1992). Emancipatory narratives: Rewriting the master script in the school. *Journal of Negro Education, 61*, 341-355.

Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

U.S. Census Bureau, (2000). *The Asian population: 2000. Census 2000 brief*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

UD 035831

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Recognizing, Respecting, and Representing: Three R's of Asian Indian Cultural Identity in American Schools

Author(s): BELOO MEHRA

Corporate Source: ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY MCGREGOR

Publication Date:

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1

☑

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A

☐

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B

☐

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, please

Signature: Beloo Mehra	Printed Name/Position/Title: BELOO MEHRA, ASST. PROFESSOR
Organization/Address: ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY MCGREGOR 800 LIVERMORE STREET, YELLOW SPRINGS, OHIO 45387-1608	Telephone: 937-769-1874 FAX: 937-769-1807
	E-Mail Address: bmehra@mcgregor.edu Date: 6/18/03

bmehra@mcgregor.edu

(Over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or*, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
1129 SHRIVER LAB
COLLEGE PARK, MD 20742-5701
ATTN: ACQUISITIONS

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
4483-A Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706

Telephone: 301-552-4200
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-552-4700
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfacility.org